**Autoethnography Pre-writing: Cultural Inventory**

**Purpose**

This assignment asks you to think about yourself as a member of a particular culture or community by exploring such areas as rituals, practices, history and/or artifacts related to your family, community, gender, political beliefs, or interest group (church, sports, clubs, etc.)

**Instructions**

Think about something you participate in and identify with, say, for example, marching band. Consider this as a “culture.” If you had to explain this culture and your participation in it to someone from a completely different culture, what kinds of qualities would you highlight? What would be most important? Least important? Your reflections can be in the form of a free write, list, web, cluster or more formal paragraphs. Just be sure to answer the questions fully and thoughtfully.

* What kinds of things do members of this cultural group do and why? What do they gain from engaging in these activities? Describe these activities or rituals in detail (thick description).
* How does the group define itself? What characteristics are most important? Least? Are there unique characteristics that mark this group?
* How do you think/feel that outsiders perceive this group? Why? Is this perception justified?
* List as many elements of this culture as you can. Using the marching band example, you might list: instruments, sheet music, hats, boots, tassels, music holders, uniforms, chin straps, formation, the conductor, practices, the football game, performances, etc.
* How do you think membership in the culture has shaped the person you are? Try to be specific.
* What kinds of rituals are important to this group, if any? (Not necessarily religious; can also include holidays, weekly shopping with friends, movie night, preparing for an event, etc.)
* Are there any artifacts or documents associated with this cultural group? (For example, in the marching band, the music sheet, uniform, etc.) Describe one or more of these artifacts in great detail and explain their significance.
* Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were completely different from others or another cultural group? How did this make you feel? What did you hope they would understand about you?

**Introductions, or Making an Effort to Interest a Reader**

Start with an **artifact** that represents the group.

* Describe it in detail—explore as many qualities of it as possible.
* Explore the emotions and experiences you associate with the artifact. What story about your subculture does it tell?
* Consider the ways you might describe your artifact to different audiences (reminder: your audience is an outsider).

Start with **a moment or an event** that is essential/characteristic/unique/symbolic of your membership in a culture.

* Describe it in detail—put the reader “in the room.”
* Explore the emotions and meaning associated with the moment or event.
* Consider the ways you might describe your artifact to different audiences.

Start with a **metaphor** such as the one used in *Dogtown and Z Boys* when the group was called a “mafia.”

* Introduce your metaphor—extend it—and then go about the business of showing the people, history, hierarchy, etc.

**Organization, or How to Guide a Reader Through Your Paper**

Start at the beginning—**think chronologically**. Track/trace your history within a culture, showing the highlights of your time with the group.

Similar to a straight chronology but oftentimes more interesting, **a narrative** which tells some story of the group and your participation in it, can be a great way to organize a paper. *What story do you want to tell?*

The simplest (but not the best for this type of paper, in my opinion) organizing principle is to spend a paragraph on the rituals, a paragraph on the artifacts, a paragraph on how outsiders perceive your group, etc. I'd call this organizing by **definition or classification.**

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**Miscellaneous**

* Most kids need to be pushed to additional specificity and need to be reminded to be specific enough that their version of “Friday Night Lights” needs to be tailored so it’s not just like every other one.
* Subcultures often need to be “zoomed in on” some more: “You’re not just in the marching band, you’re in the woodwinds section.”
* “Yeah, I know, you don’t belong to anything. But what do you and all the rest like you do when you’re not busy not fitting in?”

**THE BOTTOM LINE: As an insider, explain your subculture to an outsider.**